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The Whole Horse: Walter Sullivan and the State of Southern Letters



In his controversial memoir *Making It*, Norman Podhoretz characterizes the several generations of writers associated with the *Partisan Review* as "The Family." It should be clear by now that modern southern literature is also a multi-generational family, with its share of filial loyalties and sibling rivalries. The Vanderbilt branch of that family came into being with the birth of John Crowe Ransom in 1888

utopia envisioned in the nineteenth century by Henry Timrod and Robert Barnwell Rhett became the Edenic southern past recreated by twentieth-century romantics such as Margaret Mitchell. That both these earthly paradises were unreal goes without saying. What Sullivan finds far more damning is that they were based on an immanent (even pagan) metaphysic. In our own time that metaphysic has not taken the form of deifying a particular image of society (except perhaps among orthodox Marxists), but of sacramentalizing the artist as an enemy of society. For both the artist and the community that has been a disastrous turn of events.

Sullivan supports his generalizations about the decline of recent southern fiction by citing the postwar work of such major writers as William Faulkner, Eudora Welty, and Robert Penn Warren. (*Go Down, Moses* was the last of Faulkner's great novels; *The Optimist's Daughter* is not as good as *The Golden Apples*; and the renaissance itself ended with the publication of *All the King's Men*.) Moreover, he does not find much hope for the revival of the renaissance in the sensationalism of such modern apostates as William Styron and Cormac McCarthy, whose stylistic brilliance is not matched by any piety for myth and community; or in the existentialist musings of Walker Percy, whom Sullivan admires more as a thinker than a craftsman. There may be more good writers in the South today than at any previous time, but there are fewer great ones. Of those who came to prominence as late as the 1950's, only Flannery O'Connor makes it into Sullivan's pantheon of major figures. And her sense of myth and community was finally less southern than Catholic.

If Sullivan is right, then the death of southern literature is simply an instance of the death of literature in general. His most compelling case for that view is stated not in *A Requiem for the Renaissance*, but in his earlier essay "The New Faustus: The Southern Renaissance and the Joycean Aesthetic." Here, Sullivan argues that James Joyce's *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* is the sacred text of those who see the world (both this one and the one to come) as well lost for the sake of art. By placing himself apart from the community and above God, the artist who adopts the Joycean aesthetic becomes a modern Faustus who has sold his soul for a kind of earthly magic.

The spiritual folly of such a trade is evident to any believing Christian; however, it is not primarily as a Christian but as a literary critic that Sullivan writes. He is concerned with the damage that the Joycean aesthetic has done to art itself. Properly understood, art is a means of expressing reverence for the mystery and complexity of life. When the means becomes an end (indeed *the* end), it loses its connection with life and drifts into either despair or self-referentiality. (Marlowe's Faustus ended up as a cheap magician and practical jokester.) That this should finally have happened even in the South indicates the seriousness of our present predicament.

"The New Faustus" is one of eight essays in Sullivan's remarkable little book *Death by Melancholy*. Although the lectures in *A Requiem for the Renaissance* probably played well from the podium, they appear a bit too schematic and opinionated on the printed page. *Death by Melancholy*, however, reveals Sullivan to be an extraordinarily astute reader of literature as well as an impassioned polemicist. His technical intelligence (which is probably due in part to his own labors in the craft of fiction) is immense. He can spot the virtues and defects of a particular writer's work as well as any critic in the business. He has sufficient integrity to identify what is good in the work of writers he despises and what is less than successful in the efforts of those he admires. Consider, for example, his explanation of why Flannery O'Connor's natural metier was short fiction:

Complex characterization is the *sine qua non* of the novel: the characters must not only have epiphanies: they must change and develop in terms of what they have done and seen. It was the nature of Flannery O'Connor's fictional vision that discovery on the part of her people was all. When one has witnessed the flaming bush or the tongues of fire or the descending

dove, the change is final and absolute, and whatever happens thereafter is anticlimax. This is why the characters in O'Connor's novels fade and become static and often bore us with their sameness before we are done with the book. But fulfilling their proper roles — that is of revelation, discovery — in the short stories, they are not boring, and they do what they were conceived to do.

II

In taking an insistently moral view of literature and the literary vocation, Sullivan has left himself open to attack from aesthetes, modernists and postmodernists, ethical relativists, New South progressives, smart aleck reviewers, and the sort of individuals who can publish their views only by defacing the margins of library books. A particularly ignorant and meanspirited example of such hostility is Thomas L. McHaney's review of *A Requiem for the Renaissance*, published in the Winter 1976-77 issue of the *Mississippi Quarterly*.

To begin with McHaney, who never misses an opportunity to find minor errors in the scholarship of others, twice refers to the book he is reviewing as *A Requiem for the Renaissance*, rather than the *Renascence*. He accuses Sullivan of failing to support his literary judgments, while McHaney himself dogmatically asserts that the fiction of Andrew Lytle, Warren's *All the King's Men*, and Tate's *The Fathers* are not worth the attention Sullivan lavishes on them. Moreover, McHaney is certain that that attention is a function of "shared associations with Vanderbilt University." For good measure, he reaches back nearly fifty years to haul out a stale and largely irrelevant anti-Agrarian canard. Reading Sullivan, smirks McHaney, "almost makes one who would write in and about the South afraid to have running water in his house."

The literary hit men are likely to be back in full force with the publication of Sullivan's forthcoming book *In Praise of Blood Sports and Other Essays*. To paraphrase John Crowe Ransom, Walter Sullivan is neither reconstructed nor regenerate. In fact, his theological position is even more sharply defined as a result of his conversion to Roman Catholicism. The only important differences between this book and Sullivan's previous collections are that *Blood Sports* contains essays on the modern British writers Joseph Conrad, Elizabeth Bowen, Evelyn Waugh, and William Golding (none of whom went to Vanderbilt); while two of the southern pieces (those on Richard Weaver and Andrew Lytle) are written in an engaging personal voice previously absent from Sullivan's criticism.

In "Richard Weaver and the Bishop's Widow: A Cautionary Tale," Sullivan begins by recalling a fiction writing class he taught in the summer of 1958. One of his students, the widow of an Episcopal bishop, persisted in creating "characters who were free of fault and immune to error." In an attempt to convince her that a belief in original sin is essential to creating a fully realized fictional world, he played her a tape of Richard Weaver's lecture on "Contemporary Southern Literature." Faced with Weaver's argument for innate depravity, the widow said to Sullivan, "I am surprised. I thought you were the only person left in the world who thought that way." Secretly Sullivan "half agreed with her." "Many believed in evil," he writes, "but few believed in sin."

Not only was Richard Weaver one of the few who did believe in sin, he was also one of the most articulate defenders of southern culture to write in this century. Sullivan calls him the "St. Paul of the Vanderbilt Agrarians." Although he was born too late to be one of the original twelve, he kept the Agrarian faith when Ransom, Warren, Tate, and others were moving on to different interests and different creeds. (Of the original group, only Donald Davidson never wavered in his commitment to the cause.) Ironically, Weaver's reverence for the traditional South was enhanced by his exile in Chicago. Whenever he crossed the Mason-Dixon Line, he couldn't help sensing the cultural superiority of his old home to his current place of residence. Perhaps for this reason, he was less aware of changes in the South than those who

had never left. At the time of his death, he had accepted a faculty position at Vanderbilt. Whether living in present-day Nashville would have changed his view of southern culture is something we will never know. In any event, just about every subsequent champion of the traditional South sees himself as following in Weaver's footsteps.

As much as Sullivan admired Weaver as both a person and thinker, he believes that Weaver's view of religion was far too amorphous. Like John Crowe Ransom before him, Weaver argued that a sense of the transcendent was essential to a healthy culture. True as this might be, it is essentially an instrumentalist view of religion. In *God Without Thunder* and elsewhere, Ransom contended that religion existed for the sake of its ritual rather than its dogma. (There is more than a little truth to the surmise of Yvor Winters that what Ransom really wanted was thunder without God.) Even if this is true, it is clear that the evangelical Protestantism native to the South would not do for what the Agrarians had in mind. Sensing that this is the case, the latter-day Weaverite Marion Montgomery tries to make honorary southerners out of such Anglo and Roman Catholic traditionalists as T. S. Eliot and Jacques Maritain. In so doing he suggests, however subtly, that the common bond of temperament is more important than substantive differences in theology. This may simply be an instrumentalism of a different stripe. "I confess to being befuddled," Sullivan writes, "by a system that attempts to answer Tate's objection to the southern religion by claiming that Thomists are Confederates at heart."

If the instrumentalist approach is the wrong way to apprehend religion, it is precisely the way that art ought to be viewed. In his affectionate tribute "Andrew Lytle: The Mythmaker at Home," Sullivan cites André Malraux's observation that "we began to think of statues and paintings and cunningly wrought artifacts as art only after we had diverted them from their intended purposes and, in many cases, removed them from their proper locations." This is true of crucifixes and holy pictures and figures of saints, which were originally intended to aid the faithful in their worship. It is also true of portraits, which were once painted or carved to commemorate a family's history or to celebrate great events in the collective life of a community. Today we have taken the statue from the temple, the crucifix from the church, and the portrait from the living room wall and gathered them under the roof of a museum. "All these objects are given a new reason for being: they are no longer aids to worship or to memory, but works of art to be admired for themselves."

To Sullivan's mind, this segregation and deification of art has led us down a slippery slope that finally allows Faulkner to say "that in order to do his work, a writer would and should steal from his grandmother." Fortunately, there are still a few writers who do not subscribe to this homespun version of the Joycean aesthetic, who realize that it is more important to be a good man than to be a good artist. Andrew Lytle is one of them. "[I]n *A Wake for the Living*," Sullivan writes, "he refutes the notion of robbing one's grandmother for the sake of art by putting his own grandmother — and his aunts and uncles and cousins — into a book. They and his affection for them become parts of his art and not enemies of it." More than anything else it is this sense of life's wholeness that is missing in so much contemporary literature, both in the South and elsewhere.

A man who valued and sought this sense of wholeness in his art without ever achieving it in his life was Sullivan's friend and mentor Allen Tate. In his gracefully written memoir *Allen Tate: A Recollection*, Sullivan confronts the paradoxes of Tate's character with a mixture of candor and affection. He writes of a man who believed in the moral dictates of the Catholic Church, while living a life marred by adultery and divorce. Philosophically Tate was one of the most conservative of the Fugitive-Agrarians, and artistically one of the most bohemian. By turns he could be charming and nasty, loyal and petty. Despite a nearly total commitment to his art, he started many more projects than he finished. Like Robinson's Miniver Cheevy, he "scorned

the gold he sought / But sore annoyed was he without it." He seemed to excite contradictory passions in virtually everyone who knew him. His friend Brainard Cheney once said of him, while pounding his fist on his own dinner table, "He's a monster! God damn it, he's a monster! But I love him."

Technically, Sullivan's memoir seems to owe much to the new journalism. His use of dialogue, point of view, setting, and characterization are novelistic in the best sense of the term. Consider his use of one of the most effective and popular narrative devices of the twentieth century — the peripheral narrator. In this kind of story, an intelligent observer (Marlow, Nick Carraway, Jack Burden) finds his life intertwined with that of a dynamic and enigmatic protagonist. For Walter Sullivan the fateful meeting came in April, 1943, when he was a nineteen-year-old Vanderbilt sophomore.

Only a few months shy of his induction into the Marine Corps, Sullivan was invited to spend a week with several other young writers at the home of Allen Tate and Caroline Gordon in Monteagle, Tennessee. There he met Peter Taylor, Robert ("Cal") Lowell, and Lowell's wife Jean Stafford. After everyone had been drinking a good deal on Saturday night, "Jean asked Peter if he agreed that Cal was the greatest poet who ever lived. When Peter said no, she threw a jar of mayonnaise in his direction. It missed Peter and broke against the wall." Later that night Sullivan, whose room was separated by only a thin partition from that of a female guest, "was awakened by the sound of Allen's making love." The utter recklessness of this action, taken in a house full of people with his wife down the hall, suggests that for Tate danger added to the thrill of sex.

Sullivan's narrative is episodic, as his contacts with Tate were spread over several decades; however, the most sustained and intimate period of their relationship came during the last decade of the poet's life, when Tate and his third wife — the former nun Helen Heinz — lived in Monteagle and Nashville, Tennessee. During those years, the young Mrs. Tate (half her husband's age) gave birth to three children and lost one in a bizarre nursery accident. Within a short time, she found herself responsible for the care of two small children and a bedridden old man whose body was wasting away with emphysema. Based on the bare facts of the situation, one is tempted to feel sorry for Helen Tate; however, Sullivan deprives us of that easy response by painting a picture of a greedy and overbearing shrew who made her husband's life miserable. In particular, he accuses her of helping to drive a wedge between Tate and his life-long friend Andrew Lytle.

The tendency in writing about the Fugitive-Agrarians is either to lionize or attack them. Sullivan undertakes the more difficult task of presenting them as he knew them. Because he is himself an insider, he can get away with telling the truth without seeming like a gossip or a snitch. As Robert B. Heilman recently pointed out in the *Sewanee Review*, Sullivan takes Tate's greatness as a given. He is writing for readers who share that assumption and who are already familiar with the public careers of the many figures mentioned in his pages (a helpful identifying list of around ninety of them precedes the narrative proper). Persons who really don't care about the rift between Tate and Lytle or the literary politics behind selecting the editor of the *Sewanee Review* are likely to respond to this book as one uninterested in politics might respond to the plethora of Washington talk shows on cable television. (For junkies such as myself, it is precisely these features that make the book so mesmerizing.) However, anyone with even a passing interest in modern southern literature, not to mention good writing, should read Sullivan's marvelously evocative portraits of Donald Davidson, John Crowe Ransom, Robert Penn Warren, and Andrew Lytle. Sullivan makes you think you knew these people or at least wish that you had.

III

Like his criticism, Sullivan's fiction is concerned with moral action played out

in the context of southern culture. His first novel, *Sojourn of a Stranger* (1957), treats the southern past directly by being an historical narrative; however, its larger meanings seem intended also for a contemporaneous audience. Surprisingly, the statement this novel makes about tradition, race, and what Faulkner called "the human heart in conflict with itself" were generally ignored by early reviewers, who seemed more interested in discussing Sullivan's success in recreating middle Tennessee during the ante-bellum years. (Judged solely on those terms, *Sojourn* is a superbly well realized piece of fiction.) That is probably just as well, because Sullivan's social and moral vision is not well suited to an age of liberal millennialism.

Because the novel's protagonist, Allen Hendrick, is the son of a southern aristocrat and a New Orleans octoroon, readers might expect another Faulknerian tale of sexual betrayal and family doom. However, the aristocrat is no Massa-in-the-woodpile but a liberal humanitarian; and the octoroon is neither a slave girl nor a kept woman but his lawfully wedded wife. Everything that Major Marcus Hendrick does is motivated by an admirable sense of social justice. He drops out of a promising law practice when the senior partner wins the acquittal of a man who murdered one of his slaves; he forsakes real estate speculation when asked to defraud a widow; and he marries his wife when the Kentucky planter whose mistress she had been returns home. He frees his slaves only to discover that they are even more helpless and shiftless than when they were in bondage. And he dies of apoplexy when he reads that South Carolina has seceded from the union.

The late twentieth-century reader is likely to sympathize with Marcus Hendrick and regret that there were not more like him in the old South. And yet, his good will creates problems for others. Speaking of Marcus's marriage, Andrew Lytle writes: "His act is an irresponsible act for two reasons: he ignores the inequalities of the social order without being able to find any concrete means to better the situation. And so he isolates himself and his wife from the society which surrounds him. At least in New Orleans the condition of the kept octoroon gave her a place and a society of a kind, but in violating the mores he not only cut her off from this but himself as well, establishing them both in a social vacuum." The situation seems to be resolved happily when Marcus's wife Lucy insists that the family return to Marcus's home turf of Gallatin, Tennessee, believing correctly that her son's grandfather will be so taken with the boy that all will be forgiven. Young Allen does inherit his grandfather's estate and wins the friendship and esteem of virtually everyone in the community. The only thing he lacks is the hand of the woman he loves. The taboo against miscegenation (especially when it is the man who carries the tainted blood) is just too strong for the girl's father to grant his consent.

When Allen's beloved, Katherine Rutledge, is denied permission to marry him, his love for her is gradually transformed into hatred for her father and brother Percy (a sort of headstrong Confederate Hotspur). This hatred sustains Allen through the hardships of the Civil War (which passes a bit too quickly as Sullivan brings the novel to a close), until he actually feels deprived by the death of old Rutledge and young Percy. Allen returns home after the war to find that his mansion has been burned by a perfidious free black who had always scorned the way Marcus's benevolence exposed his own inadequacies. Too late, Allen sees his own self-destructive animosities more crudely mirrored in the behavior of the black. Katherine is so guilt-stricken by the grief that her romance had brought to her father and brother that she refuses to marry Allen, even though she is finally free to do so. The only consolation with which he is left is increased self-knowledge.

If Allen is shocked by recognizing a kindred spirit in the free black Ben Hill, then what of the enlightened modern reader who has shared Allen's ambitions, loves, and hatreds? We cannot pronounce judgment on Allen without also pronouncing judgment on ourselves. There is much to admire in Allen and much to detest in his enemies. In an ideal society, neither he nor his mother would suffer discrimination

because of their alien blood. Blacks and whites *should* be free to intermarry as their love dictates, and bigoted fathers and brothers *should not* be able to prevent the happiness of others. But is it not the role of the novelist to bring about that ideal society. (As Auden wrote in his elegy on Yeats, "poetry makes nothing happen.") It would have been easy enough for Sullivan to criticize the inequities of the antebellum South (or for that matter of the South of the 1950's), but his concern is with the individual. Given the realities of the world in which he lived, Allen Hendrick should have shown greater sensitivity for the values of others and less passion for abstract justice. Because that simple message is so difficult to accept in an age that has elevated justice above every other social and personal good, *Sojourn of a Stranger* is a more courageous book than any dozen protest novels.

In *The Long, Long Love* (1959), Sullivan takes us to the Nashville of our own time. His protagonist is Horatio Adams, a wealthy and aging member of the southern aristocracy. After his wife's suicide (prompted in part by cancer and in part by having to live with Horatio), he is plunged into a period of depression and heavy drinking. When he meets and marries a beautiful young woman named Emily, Horatio begins putting his life back together. Unfortunately, his reverence for the past is so obsessive that he nearly falls apart again when vandals desecrate the grave of his grandfather, a Confederate general, on Halloween. In the meantime, Emily and Horatio's son Tavean fall in love and skip town together.

When Horatio tries to move his grandfather's body to a more secure family plot, he discovers that nobody is buried in the old man's grave at the Confederate cemetery thirty miles south of Nashville. Just before the desertion of his wife and son, Horatio dispatches his daughter's fiancé (a young history professor at Vanderbilt) to find where the general is really buried. In quick succession, Horatio learns that his fleeing son has been killed in a car wreck and that his grandfather had not fallen on the field of battle, but had been shot when he was apprehended in bed with another man's wife. After a humiliating encounter with a con lady in Florida (who gets him drunk and then rolls him), a chastened Horatio returns to Nashville and is reunited with Emily, whose pity he readily accepts as a kind of love.

In this novel Sullivan experiments with different points of view, allowing Horatio, his daughter Anne, and her fiancé Philip to tell the story. Although each voice is convincing on its own terms, the shifting perspectives deprive the book of the overarching critical intelligence that is necessary to make sense of Horatio Adams's life. In Horatio, Sullivan has given us a man whose piety for the southern past is everything that an Agrarian could want. And yet this piety goes a long way toward making life miserable for both Horatio and those closest to him. If tradition is the living faith of the dead and traditionalism the dead faith of the living, Horatio is clearly the victim of a moribund traditionalism. But Sullivan is finally too much in sympathy with Horatio to make this cautionary tale into an anti-Agrarian satire or polemic. By the same token, the younger people in Horatio's family are not sufficiently shallow or insensitive to make us admire the old guy as the lesser of two evils. We are finally asked to follow Emily's lead and give him *our* pity as well.

There is much to admire in *The Long, Long Love*. (The title, by the way, comes from the old Scottish ballad "The Daemon Lover.") The three narrators are believable and compelling; the action is well paced; and the thematic conflict between old South and new is clearly delineated. Some readers may be put off by Horatio's rhetoric (so florid as to be embarrassing in places), but it is entirely appropriate to his character. Others may find the ending too happy; however, it is at best an ambiguous happiness (who really wants to settle for pity as a kind of love?) and one that has been purchased with much suffering. What makes this novel finally less satisfactory than *Sojourn of a Stranger* is that the shifting perspectives tell us both too little and too much. Although Tavean and Emily are not inherently implausible characters, we don't know as much as we need to about their motivations. Conse-

quently, in their case character seems molded by plot rather than plot being driven by character. On the other hand, we probably see more than we need to of the inner workings of Horatio's mind. It is doubtful that Gatsby would have been as sympathetic a character had Fitzgerald let him tell any of his own story.

The shifting omniscience of *Sojourn* allows Sullivan to give us a glimpse into any mind he chooses without forcing him to linger there longer than is necessary. Of course, first person narration creates greater empathy by giving us an identifiable speaking voice. If that was the correct technical choice for *The Long, Long Love*, I would have preferred a single narrator who was involved enough with Horatio to know his story yet detached enough to put it into perspective. Horatio's daughter's fiancé Philip Holcomb might have been such a narrator.

As a southern history professor, Philip is sensitive to the burden of the past in the present. As Horatio's prospective son-in-law, he is around during much of the story and has every reason for wanting to know about things that he has not directly witnessed. (Consider the narrative sleight of hand that Fitzgerald employs to fill Nick in on Gatsby and Daisy's past.) What is equally important, he is sufficiently distanced from the principal characters to analyze and judge all of them. Holcomb does speak in his own voice when he tells us of his quest for Horatio's grandfather's grave site. What is going on in the present is also a mystery, but one that requires the sensibility of a philosopher rather than the instincts of a bloodhound. Like Warren's Jack Burden, Philip Holcomb is an historian who might have been equal to that task.

IV

In his essay "Southern Writers in Spiritual Exile," Sullivan writes: "The only way to recreate a South that is hospitable to the production of great literature is to recapture the sacred. I think, paradoxically perhaps, that the best way to do this is to seek the transcendent outside the ambience of southern imagery because the images of the South, familiar and beloved as they are, tempt us to believe that we have not lost our piety." If we want an example of what he is talking about, we need look no farther than Sullivan's own story "Elizabeth." Published in the Summer 1979 issue of the *Sewanee Review*, "Elizabeth" is set in an urban environment that is not recognizably southern; however, it is as unabashedly Catholic as anything written by Evelyn Waugh or Graham Greene.

The title character is a young waitress who is married to an abusive and psychopathic husband. Herman "Lucky" Baker had been a celebrated halfback in high school, but "at under 140 pounds he was too small to play college football." (Sullivan clues us in to this quite subtly when he writes of Lucky, "he broke for a touchdown, scampering through a hole that future college players made for him.") Like the protagonist of Irwin Shaw's "The Eighty-Yard Run," everything after football is downhill for Lucky. He is too volatile ever to hold a job for very long, goes around with a grudge against the world, and beats his long-suffering wife. After a particularly savage pummeling causes her to lose the child she is carrying, Elizabeth moves out. The story ends when she is summoned to the police morgue to identify Lucky, who has been killed in a barroom brawl.

The sadly misnamed Lucky and the handful of minor characters are all convincingly drawn; however, the crowning achievement of this story is Sullivan's depiction of Elizabeth. Using third person limited point of view, he takes us into the mind of this troubled woman whose simple faith is shaken by the nightmare of her marriage. Significantly, the institutional church is of little help to her during her time of trial. One day after she has lost her child and left her husband, she enters a church to pray. She no longer has her rosary, which was stolen with her purse, and she doesn't even bother to light a candle to the Virgin. Sitting in a pew in the back of the church, she feels abandoned by God and man.

Like Blanche Dubois, Elizabeth depends on the kindness of strangers. When she is hospitalized after losing her baby, a young doctor shows her sympathy and gives

A History of the World in 10 1/2 Chapters. By Julian Barnes. Knopf, \$18.95. (h.b.)

It is easy to be deceived by Barnes's recent novel. It appears to be merely a collection of different stories which do not come together as a thorough, complex novel. But if we read it closely we see that the title is a clue to serious meanings, sophisticated critiques. Barnes unites "history" and "word"; it is this linkage — its changing perspectives, its shifts of ontology — which underlies the amusing, philosophical pattern of the novel.

Each chapter exists as a commentary upon the previous one; there is a revisionist, comic tone which suggests that we cannot rest with any consistent view of virtue, knowledge, wholeness. To quote the "woodworm" aboard Noah's Ark: "And it was something beyond what we then knew. As if they were saying, you think this is the worst. Don't count on it." The last sentence underlines the ultimate meaning of the work.

Once we notice repeated references to the Ark and to *origins*, we try to fit them into a pattern we can "count on." But the pattern is continually changing. And it is the changing inconsistent "playful" perspectives which alert us to the fact that history itself — and the world and the word — are subject to incongruities, reversals, inversions (perversions, diversions).

Thus the "disturbed" survivor of an atomic attack — she is a kind of Noah after the Flood — says that she is "going round in circles," that the world itself "does the same thing." She — and the world — is a case of "double stress," of confusing coincidences, possible connections. The survivor, indeed, may be imagining — creating — a historical event which occurs in her own wrenched desires: she is a "fabulist." She says about her authoritative doctor — a patriarchal figure: "First he tells me I'm projecting myself on the world, then he tells me I'm doing what we all know the world does all the time." Is there significance out "there" in the "world" or only in one's mind?

In the alarming complexities of "Shipwreck" Barnes offers a widely known historical perspective on a particular shipwreck. The shipwreck becomes the subject of a famous French painting. But the painting eliminates, distorts, revises the event so that we are unclear about both: "What has happened? The painting has slipped history's anchor." There is, in effect, no "anchor" — we see that art uses reality in such a way that it eliminates or adds to it. And we are forced to wonder whether the painting is somehow more "real" than the event it supposedly portrays. And to complicate matters: Barnes inserts a reproduction of the painting in "full color" in his text. Thus we have two "paintings": the real one (which ironically is described by language) and the reproduction. Is language able to explain — or even describe — painting?

And so it goes — we are offered clues throughout the novel, repeated references to sacrifice, survival, shipwreck, ark, flood. We want to join them, but we realize we cannot put the parts together. We are frustrated. I take it that Barnes deliberately *shipwrecks* us so that we are drowned in (im)possible significances. We are survivors; we resemble many of the characters who are not certain where they are, why they exist.

The work, therefore, mirrors itself (as each chapter mirrors the preceding one) and it becomes a world of words we want to capture and dominate. But it eludes us at every turn. There is nothing we can hold onto, no stability we can grasp. And yet in an ironic, paradoxical way we understand that "uncertainty" itself is a *certainty*. Or is it?

The "final" chapter — does time exist in the novel and/or in the world? — has a narrator who tries to understand the meaning of heaven. He has survived earthly life; he is another super-Noah. But he is unsure about his identity, his "dream" of — or real presence in — heaven. We expect answers from him. He simply says: "No,

Meditations: 4

I needed more than just a course in college,
For I received my god from someone's myth
About a death-producing fruit of knowledge
A fallen angel tricked my parents with.
And I dreamed Cain to come and kill all snakes,
Disturb the grave of Abel's bashed in skull
And tell the sworded angel, "Your god fakes,
And with the graves of God, I am fed full."
While drunk, I cursed the kin I could not leave
And never finished writing well cast Cain,
Until he came himself to the belief
That in his horror he had left unslain
His father, source of hardened, drunken sin,
Who coiled 'round Eve and would not let him in.

— Michael Graves



Regarding Poetry Submissions

It is necessary to declare a moratorium on poetry considerations until further notice.